

USING  
THE INFO  
PROVIDED  
TRACK THE  
DOWNFALL  
OF THE  
CLASSICAL  
CIVILIZATIONS

# END OF AN ERA



**ALL GOOD THINGS MUST COME TO AN END.**

# ROME



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## 漢朝

HAN CHINA

GUPTAN INDIA



FREEMAN-PEDIA

# DOWNFALL ROME

In 376 CE, large numbers of Goths crossed the Danube. They sought admission to the territory of the Roman Empire, a political institution which, despite having both new and longstanding systematic weaknesses, wielded effective power across the lands surrounding the Mediterranean and beyond. The Empire had large numbers of trained, supplied, and disciplined soldiers, it had a comprehensive civil administration based in thriving cities with effective control over public finances, and it maintained extreme differences of wealth and status including slavery on a large scale. It had wide-ranging trade networks that allowed even modest households to use goods made by professionals a long way away. Among its literate elite it had ideological legitimacy as the only worthwhile form of civilization and a unity based on comprehensive familiarity with Greek and Roman literature and rhetoric.

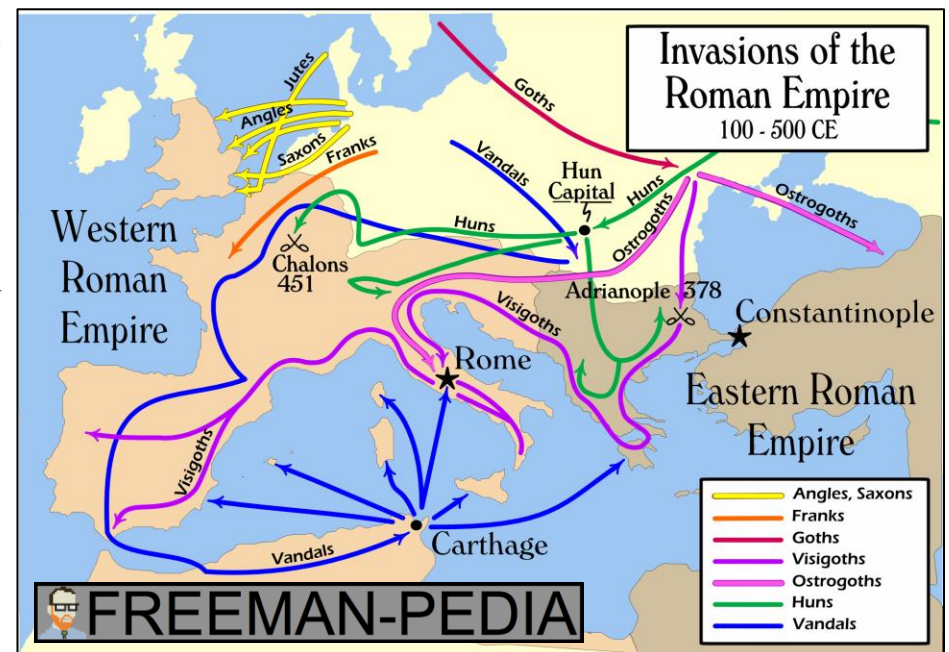
By 476, when Odoacer deposed the Emperor Romulus, the Western Roman Empire wielded negligible military, political, or financial power and had no effective control over the scattered Western domains that still described themselves as Roman. While its legitimacy lasted for centuries and its cultural influence remains today, the Western Empire never had the strength to rise again.

## DECLINE

The Romans had existed as an important power for over 1000 years. They had brought stability, prosperity, and order to the civilised West. Excellent roads connected the far reaches of the empire with the capital at Rome. These were built originally for military purposes but improved all communications and trade. Roman law kept the internal peace and 20 to 30 Roman legions defended the frontiers.

All was not perfect, however. Emperors held absolute authority. This worked well with good emperors, but incompetent ones could do great harm. The rules for succession to the throne were never clear, and debilitating civil wars often resulted. The bureaucracy that managed the empire on a daily basis grew more corrupt, increasing the dissatisfaction of the common citizen. The wealth of the empire gradually concentrated in the hands of a minority while a large slave population did most of the work. The borders of the empire were immense and put a strain on military resources (500,000 soldiers defended a frontier that required 3 million or more to be secured). Roman conquests had ceased in the second century A.D., bringing an end to massive inflows of plunder and slaves. Taxes increased and production fell as the work force declined. A plague may have killed 20 percent of the empire's population in the third and fourth centuries, further reducing trade and production.

In the late third century, the Roman Empire was split into eastern and western halves in an attempt to make for easier rule and better control. In 323 Constantine became emperor after a civil war and established his eastern capital at Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople. During the next century the eastern and western parts of the empire gradually established separate identities, although nominally the same empire. These identities were partially due to the different pressures brought to bear on them from the outside and the local culture. The Western Empire was predominantly Latin; the Eastern Empire was predominantly Greek (although they referred to themselves as Romans). The Eastern Empire survived the cataclysm of the third and fourth centuries because it had a larger population (70 percent of the empire's total), better emperors, more money, and a far better army and navy.





# DOWNFALL ROME

## THE GERMANIC PEOPLE TO THE NORTH/EAST

In the 4th century A.D. most Germanic peoples in Europe were living east of the Rhine and north of the Danube. These groups were seminomadic, herding their flocks and tilling the soil. Large and vigorous, the people prized strength and courage in battle.

For hundreds of years the Germans had exerted pressure on the frontiers of the empire. In 105 B.C. German warriors inflicted a terrible defeat on a Roman army, but four years later, a capable Roman leader, Marius, became a national hero when he outmaneuvered the Germans and defeated them. Again in Julius Caesar's time, German invaders tried to conquer part of Gaul but were defeated. During the reign of Augustus, the Romans launched a drive against the restless German tribes between the Rhine and the Elbe rivers, but in 9 A.D. the Roman legions suffered a crushing defeat in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest. Three legions were completely wiped out. From then on the Romans were content to hold the frontier on the Rhine-Danube line, and quiet continued for a long period. Again, in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, from 161 to 180 A.D., and for 120 years afterward, the Romans had difficulty holding the Germans at the Frontier. But after 300 A.D. peace was maintained for some seventy-five years.

## THE ROLL OF THE HUNS IN ASIA

In Asia, during the 4th century, restless nomads called Huns were on the march from the east. Mounted on swift horses, they attacked with lightning ferocity all tribes in their path. Crossing the Volga River, they conquered the Ostrogoths in eastern Europe. Fearing that the Huns would attack them also, the Visigoths implored Roman authorities for sanctuary in the empire. The Roman officials agreed, promising them lands for settlement provided they came unarmed.



FREEMAN-PEDIA

# FALL

Neither side lived up to the agreement, however, and the Visigoths, without land and facing starvation, began to sack Roman settlements. When the Roman emperor Valens led a great army against the Visigoths, to the astonishment of Romans and Germans alike, the imperial force was scattered and the emperor slain. This battle on the field of Adrianople in 378 A.D. is considered one of the decisive battles in world history because it rendered the Roman Empire defenseless. German tribes outside the frontiers began to round up their cattle, mobilize their fighting men, and move toward the Roman borders.

## THE END...

Meanwhile, the power of the emperors in Rome had fallen to a point where they had become merely puppets of the legionaries, many of whom were of German birth. In the 476 A.D., Odoacer, a commander of the Roman armies, deposed the last of the Roman emperors and became the first German ruler of Rome. This date--476 A.D.--is often cited as the date for the "fall" of Rome



The **End of the Han Dynasty** refers to the period from 189 to 220, which roughly coincides with the reign of the Han Dynasty's last ruler, Emperor Xian. During this period, the Han Empire's institutions were destroyed by the warlord Dong Zhuo, and fractured into regional regimes ruled by various warlords, some of whom were nobles and officials of the Han imperial court. Eventually, one of those warlords, Cao Cao, was able to gradually reunify the empire, ostensibly under Emperor Xian's rule, but the empire was actually controlled by Cao Cao himself. Cao Cao's efforts to completely reunite the Han Empire were rebuffed at the Battle of Red Cliffs in 208 / 209, when his armies were defeated by the allied forces of Sun Quan and Liu Bei. The Han Dynasty formally ended in 220 when Cao Cao's son and heir, Cao Pi, pressured Emperor Xian into abdicating in his favour. Cao Pi became the emperor of a new state, Cao Wei.

## DECLINE

By the 180s the Han court had grown weak, with debauched or disinterested emperors who lived only for amusement. Court eunuchs vied for power with the scholar-officials and army generals, at times even leading to massacres within the palace. In 189 CE, the warlord Dong Zhuo went so far as to assassinate the 13-year-old Emperor Shao, placing Shao's younger brother on the throne instead.

Economically, the Han government had trouble collecting enough tax revenue to fund the court and to support the armies that defended China from external threats. The scholar-officials generally exempted themselves from taxes, and the peasants had a sort of early-warning system by which they could alert one another when the tax collectors came to a particular village. The peasants would scatter to the surrounding countryside, and wait until the tax men had gone. As a result, the central government was chronically short on money.

One reason that the peasants fled at the rumor of tax collectors is that they were trying to survive on smaller and smaller plots of farm land. The population was growing quickly, and each son was supposed to inherit a piece of land when the father died. Thus, farms were quickly being carved into ever-tinier bits, and peasant families had trouble supporting themselves, even if they managed to avoid paying taxes.

Externally, the Han Dynasty faced the same threat that plagued every indigenous Chinese government throughout history: the danger of raids by the nomadic peoples of the steppes. To the north and west, China borders on desert and range-lands that have been controlled by various nomadic peoples over time, including the Uighurs, Kazakhs, Mongols, Jurchens (Manchu), and the Xiongnu.

During prosperous times, the settled agricultural people of China would simply pay tribute to troublesome nomads, or hire them to provide protection from the other tribes. Emperors even offered Chinese princesses as brides to the "barbarian" rulers in order to preserve the peace. The Han government, however, did not have the resources to buy off all of the nomads.

One of the most important factors in the collapse of the Han Dynasty, in fact, may have been the Sino-Xiongnu Wars of 133 BCE to 89 CE. Over more than two centuries, the Chinese and the Xiongnu fought throughout the western regions of China - a critical area that Silk Road trade goods had to cross to reach the Han Chinese cities. In 89 CE, the Han crushed the Xiongnu state, but this victory came at such a high price that it helped to fatally destabilize the Han government.

Interestingly, half of the Xiongnu moved west in the wake of their defeat, absorbing other nomadic groups, and forming a formidable new ethnic group known as the Huns. Thus, the descendants of the Xiongnu would be implicated in the collapse of two other great classical civilizations, as well - the Roman Empire, in 476 CE, and India's Gupta Empire in 550 CE. In each case, the Huns did not actually conquer these empires, but did weaken them militarily and economically, leading to their collapses.



The Gupta Empire (320 to 550 CE) in India was one of the world's great classical civilizations, marked by amazing advances in science, art and literature. Creator of India's Golden Age, it was likely founded by a member of a lower Hindu caste, the Vaishya or farmer caste, in reaction to abuses by previous princely rulers.

Although the Gupta Empire survived after other famous classical states, such as China's Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire, it collapsed under some of the same pressures.

# DECLINE

Politically, the Gupta Dynasty grew weak from a number of succession disputes. As the emperors lost power, regional lords gained increasing autonomy. By 500, many were declaring their independence and refusing to pay taxes to the central Gupta state.

By the later Gupta era, the government was having trouble collecting enough tax money to fund both its hugely complex bureaucracy, and constant wars against foreign invaders like the Pushyamitras and the Huns. In part, this was due to the common people's dislike of the meddlesome and unwieldy bureaucracy. Even those who felt personal loyalty to the Gupta Emperor generally disliked his government, and were happy to avoid paying for it if they could.

As mentioned above, the Gupta Empire faced constant threats of invasion from the north. The cost of fighting off these invasions drained the Gupta treasury, and the government had difficulty refilling the coffers for the internal reasons noted above. Among the most troublesome of the invaders were the White Huns, who had conquered much of the northwestern section of Gupta territory by 500 CE.

Although none of the invading groups managed to completely overrun the Gupta Empire, the financial hardship helped hasten the end of the dynasty. Almost unbelievably, the Huns or their direct ancestors the Xiongnu had the same effect on two of the other great classical civilizations in earlier centuries: Han China, which collapsed in 221 CE, and the Roman Empire, which fell in 476 CE.

